

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Distinction:

The Source of our Spiritual Life and the Authority to Live it

He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11-13)

How does a sinful human come into possession of spiritual, eternal life? How does that same person, once in possession of eternal life, manifest it? How do we distinguish the two, the coming to possess it versus the manifestation of it? I fear that many sincere Christians confuse these two questions, effectively believing that the effect of eternal life is in fact its cause, or at least the agent by which it comes to be.

Let's start with a simple question. What is the *cause* of a person coming into possession of eternal life? The foundation of this truth appears in the closing phrase of the verses quoted above, "...of God." The Greek word translated "of" is "ek," meaning "...A primary preposition denoting origin (the point whence action or motion proceeds), from, out (of place, time, or cause...."¹ Notice that this word refers to *origin* or *cause*. If our belief in Jesus, our "receiving" Him, causes our eternal life, then John could not have attributed the *origin* or *cause* of our eternal life to God.

Consider this scenario in light of our questions and the dominant view of man-centered salvation, man-centered eternal life. Two men hear the same information about Jesus. One of them believes it; he "receives it" as true. The other man rejects the idea. Based on the theological premise that our faith either causes or serves as an instrument in our obtaining eternal life, we must say that the first man personally did something that originated or caused his possessing eternal life, while the other man declined to do the same thing, thus

not coming to possess it. Proponents of the man-centered concept might object by saying that God contrived the scheme by which man could, if he meets the right conditions, gain eternal life, so even if man took the catalyzing action, God is said to cause it because He devised the scheme. However, this view is rather weak in that God supposedly did exactly the same thing for each of these men, but one of them remained void of eternal life while the other came to possess it. Why? God did exactly the same for each of them. Therefore the distinction is not what God did, but what the men did that decided the outcome.

However we interpret these verses we must construct our understanding so as to clearly conclude our study with God as the *origin* or *cause* of eternal life. The man-centric view simply does not reach this conclusion, so we must reject it based on John's inspired conclusion, "...of God."

Having established this foundation for our study, let's examine the verses to see how they move through the process to this conclusion.

It is indisputable historical fact that some people in the first century who witnessed Jesus' life, God in flesh, despised Him and rejected His claims of being Messiah, God Incarnate. It is equally indisputable that some people also believed his claims and followed Him faithfully. The question at the heart of this study has nothing to do with the value of belief in Christ, nor of the validity of His claims. As Christians, we unite in a strong affirmation of the truth of His claims, as well as the rightness of believing in Him and living transformed lives that manifest our faith in Him.

It is also clear in the passage that "receiving" Him, the equivalent to believing the truth regarding Him, entitled those people to something that they would not otherwise have experienced, "...becoming sons of God." So

¹James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), G1537.

what does it mean to become a “son of God”? Is this position distinct from being born of God?

Based on the simplest of premises, that being born of God, from above, occurs because of God and not because of family ties, the will of man, or the will of human nature, what does “becoming” a son of God mean?

John also wrote of this point in his first general epistle.

"Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him." (1 John 5:1)

If we accept the common interpretation of our verses from John 1, we would make receiving Jesus, believing in Him either the cause or the instrument in our gaining eternal life, being born of God. However, in this verse John specifically states that the person who believes that Jesus is Messiah, the Christ, *is* (a present state of being, not a process that will culminate in a new state of being) born of God. A. T. Robertson, a respected New Testament linguistic authority, includes this comment from another source as part of his explanation of 1 John 5:1.

“The Divine Begetting is the antecedent, not the consequent of the believing” (Law).²

Notice the cause-effect relationship of this thought. The “Divine Begetting” is the antecedent, not the consequence, of the believing. Based on the logical order of events in 1 John 5:1, God begets prior to a person’s faith or believing in Jesus. If this be the case, it is obvious that our belief cannot cause what God already caused in us prior to our belief. When Jesus instructed Nicodemus regarding the new birth in the opening verses of John 3, He clearly stated that a person must be born again, literally, from above or of God, prior to either seeing or entering the kingdom of God. Presumably a person must see something before believing in it. However, Jesus set the order of events as new birth first, followed by seeing and/or entering God’s kingdom. He did not teach that we must see, believe in, and enter the kingdom in order to be born again. He taught the mirror opposite.

²A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 1 Jn 5:1.

So what did John intend by his references to “becoming sons of God” in our study verse? I believe the answer appears in the significant word “right” in the passage. The New Testament Greek language contains a number of words that fall within this general significance. Strong’s dictionary of New Testament words (electronic version) not only offers a basic definition of the words, but it also contains a comparison of synonyms that enables us to grasp the subtle distinctions between them. Here is the list of synonyms and their comparative meaning.

5820 Synonyms

See Definition for *bia*: 970

See Definition for *dunamis*: 1411

See Definition for *energeia*: 1753

See Definition for *exousia*: 1849

See Definition for *ischus*: 2479

See Definition for *kratos*: 2904

970: force, effective, often oppressive
power exhibiting itself in single deeds
of violence

1411: power, natural ability, general and
inherent

1753: working, power in exercise,
operative power

1849: primarily liberty of action; then
authority—either as delegated power,
or as unrestrained, arbitrary power

2479: strength, power, (especially
physical) as an endowment

2904: might, relative and manifested
power—in the NT chiefly of God³

Word Number 1849, “*exousia*,” is the word that appears in our study passage, translated as “right.” It is not natural or inherent ability, the common man-centric theological view of this passage. The word refers to “primarily liberty of action.” This simple definition, along with the nuances of meaning that appears with the available synonyms that John might have used, offers fruitful insight into the passage. To whom does God give the privilege or “liberty of action” to act like His children? Does He not reserve this privilege for those who in fact are His children, those who have already experienced the amazing reality of the new birth, of being born of God and made a real and eternal part of His family?

Let me offer a simple illustration. Suppose that a wealthy man in the

³James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible....*

community dies. His will divides his estate among his children. Who in the community has the right, privilege, or “liberty of action” of coming forward to the executor of the estate and claiming the privilege of being an heir to the man’s will? Obviously only those people who were in fact born into his family—his own children. We might extend this liberty of action or privilege to any number of things that children in a family may do because of their inherent position within a natural family.

God’s family is richly endowed with blessings and privileges that His own, His “born-again” children, are at full liberty to enjoy in their lives here and now. All of our enjoyment of God and of our relationship with Him is not reserved till after we die.

Here and now God’s children, who have already experienced that initial and vital thing called the “new birth” or “being born again of God,” may lay claim to God’s abundant blessings reserved for His children who believe in Him and who live their lives in obvious manifestation of their relationship with Him. We may become in action and privilege what we are already by birth. We may claim blessings as children of God to which we had no “right or privilege” as children of man.

This view of our study passage honors the language of the passage fully. It sets the order of events in the same sequence as they appear elsewhere in Scripture; first we are born of God, and thereafter we manifest our life by our conduct. It avoids confusing the order of birth versus the blessings that God has made uniquely available to His family, to His children. More importantly it reminds us of the incredible richness of our heritage as children of God. As a child of God, you have the privilege, indeed the “right” and the God-given authority to immerse your life in these incredible blessings. Are you living in them? Are you enjoying the richness of your inheritance now? Or are you standing apart, wishing that you could discover that richness? John explains to us the basis by which we may enrich our lives here and now as children of God. You may say that you “believe” in Him, but do you truly believe in Him so fully that you would risk everything in your world for Him? Your access to this richness is directly and proportionately measured by the depth of your belief in Him. Shallow belief will produce shallow enjoyment; deep and profound belief will result in deep and profound enjoyment of the blessings.

Claim your present heritage! Believe in Him without reservation. Your final destiny as a child of God is reserved and secure, made so by God alone. Your present joy is available, but requires your belief, your whole-hearted and unreserved belief in Him.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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